

**SUCCESSFUL RURAL ESL STUDENTS IN
SMK MUARA TUANG'S LANGUAGE LEARNING
STRATEGIES**

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by

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to find out the English language learning problem areas in the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking faced by unsuccessful rural students; the common challenges faced by the rural students in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, and the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) employed by the successful students in overcoming the challenges faced by the students. The samples are Form Four students from a rural school; SMK Muara Tuang which is situated in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. The term successful and unsuccessful refers to their English language proficiency. This was determined by the samples' performance in the English language examination at the Penilaian Menengah Rendah 2002 results. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire. It consists of background questionnaire and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 by Rebecca Oxford (1990a) for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The questionnaire was administered to 50 samples from each of the successful and unsuccessful students group. The data was analysed using SPSS version 10.0 and interpreted based on Oxford (1990a)'s SILL results interpretation key. A comparison was made between the LLS of the successful and unsuccessful groups of students. A similar LLS pattern was found used by both groups. The difference between the successful and unsuccessful students was the successful students used more compensation strategies while the unsuccessful students used more of the affective strategies. Suggestions to tackle the English language learning problem areas were based on the LLS of the successful students.

ABSTRAK

Laporan ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik masalah pembelajaran bahasa untuk Bahasa Inggeris dalam kemahiran-kemahiran membaca, menulis, mendengar dan bertutur di kalangan pelajar-pelajar tidak berjaya di luar bandar, cabaran-cabaran yang sering dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar luar bandar dalam empat kemahiran bahasa iaitu membaca, menulis, mendengar dan bertutur serta strategi yang digunakan oleh pelajar-pelajar yang berjaya dalam menangani cabaran-cabaran yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar dalam menguasai Bahasa Inggeris. Sampel kajian terdiri daripada pelajar-pelajar Tingkatan Empat di sebuah sekolah luar bandar iaitu SMK Muara Tuang di Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. Istilah-istilah berjaya dan tidak berjaya merujuk kepada tahap kefasihan sampel dalam bahasa Inggeris. Tahap kefasihan mereka ditentukan dengan berpandukan keputusan mereka dalam matapelajaran Bahasa Inggeris dalam Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah 2002. Instrumen kajian yang digunakan ialah soal selidik. Ia terdiri daripada soalan latar belakang sampel dan soal selidik Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) versi 7.0 oleh Rebecca Oxford (1990a) yang khas untuk pelajar bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing atau bahasa kedua. Soal selidik ini diberikan kepada 50 sampel daripada setiap kumpulan pelajar yang berjaya dan kumpulan pelajar yang tidak berjaya. Data dikaji dengan menggunakan SPSS versi 10.0 dan diterjemahkan berdasarkan kekunci penterjemahan keputusan SILL Oxford (1990a). Perbandingan dibuat terhadap strategi pembelajaran bahasa sampel yang berjaya dan yang tidak berjaya. Satu corak strategi pembelajaran bahasa yang serupa didapati digunakan oleh sampel dari kedua-dua kumpulan sampel. Perbezaannya adalah kumpulan yang berjaya menggunakan lebih *compensation strategies* manakala kumpulan yang tidak berjaya menggunakan lebih *affective strategies*. Cadangan untuk mengatasi masalah pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris dibuat berdasarkan strategi pembelajaran bahasa kumpulan sampel yang berjaya.

A project entitled **Successful Rural Students from SMK Muara Tuang's Language Learning Strategies** was written by Kelvin Liew Peng Chuan and submitted to the Centre for Language Studies in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science with Honours (Teaching English as Second Language).

It is hereby confirmed that the student has done all the necessary amendments of the project for acceptance.

(Signature of Supervisor)

(Mdm. Ho Ai Ping)

Date : _____

I dedicate this project to my late maternal grandmother Mdm. Chee Kheng Jeng, whose dream was to see me graduate from the university. I have lived your dreams and now end my mourn with this gift for you, Phor Phor.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	=	English as Second Language
KBSM	=	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah
LLS	=	Language Learning Strategies
SILL	=	Strategy Inventory for Language Learning
UNIMAS	=	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The composition of students in most Malaysian classrooms is of mixed ability. In the subject of English, they range from those who are competent in the four basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking to those who fail to achieve an acceptable level of proficiency in the skills mentioned (Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh, 1995)

This is partly due to the reduction in the English Language teaching time from 1780 minutes per week to 200 minutes per week (Asiah Abu Samah, 1984) as well as English period being the only time where English Language is put into use and learnt.

In the urban environment, there are more chances that urban students are exposed to environments where English Language is used. The exact opposite is expected of the Malaysian rural environment. Rural communications are less likely to take place in English as they have no reason to do so. The language for communication is the mother tongue of the community (Fox, 1997). Despite these short comings, there are also rural students who achieved an acceptable level of proficiency in English (Chamot, 1987).

When rural students are exposed to the same learning environment, the reason for difference in English Language proficiency can be explained by what learners did to

achieve successful language learning. In technical terms, the efforts by those students to learn language are called language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990b).

With this in mind, this study will provide an insight into the language learning strategies employed by the rural students who succeed in being competent in English Language and compare it with the strategies employed by the incompetent students. Based on the findings, suggestions will be made to help rural students who are incompetent in English Language.

1.1 Background to the study

In the rural language environment, English Language hardly plays any role in the lives of the rural community. Fox (1997) noted that English that was taught in rural schools remain as part of school and not functional socially. After school hours, the students will be in another linguistic environment where English lay dormant.

Communicative acts will take place in their own mother tongue. When there is no purpose for the English as Second Language (ESL) students to use the language, there will be no motivation for the students to master the language at all (Finocchiaro, 1989). In contrast to the urban learning environment where English language can be found almost everywhere, most rural students have access to English only in English lessons at schools. Most communication that took place in school and at home use language or languages other than English.

In ESL classrooms, ESL learners are made up of students who mastered English fairly well and those who face difficulties in utilizing the language to communicate as well as to extract meanings despite being taught English Language from primary school to secondary school level.

They face difficulties in mastering either one, some or all of the basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking of the English Language.

According to a research done by Institut Tamadun dan Alam Melayu (Atma), UKM (Penguasaan, 2000, 2) three factors causing language mastery problems among rural ESL were identified :

- i.their perception of English language as foreign .
- ii.students did not focus on the need to master English and are weak in vocabulary and sentence structure.
- iii.teacher factor

However there are also students who mastered English well despite facing various limitations to use the language. They were in the same learning environment in school as those 'poor' ESL learners.

Therefore, for this project, the ESL student samples will be classified under two groups : the successful ESL students group and the unsuccessful ESL students group. The successful ESL students group will be made up of students who obtained grades A,B and C for their PMR English. The samples who obtained grades D and below will be grouped under the unsuccessful ESL learner group.

The successful students could have done something on their own initiative, supported by their parents, teachers or even friends. The learning strategies employed by these successful ESL

students could be limited to classroom ESL environment, extended outside of classroom or even both. This was mentioned by Brown (1994) in his definition of strategies as "...moment to moment techniques employed to solve problems posed by second language input and output."

According to H.L.Tan (personal communications, September 14, 2002), Sarawakian Malay dialect are used in most communications in the school targeted for this study, SMK Muara Tuang, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. This dialect is used for communication between students or students to Malay or Sarawakian native teachers. The use of English is almost confined to English and Literature in English lessons in the classroom.

Therefore, the ESL students' mastery of English language in terms of the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are either highly dependent on their English teachers, library resources or other factors.

1.2 Statement of the problem

There is a worrying trend among the rural ESL student's performance in English Language. Despite being taught English Language from primary school to secondary school level, a majority of rural students still have difficulties in mastering the basic reading, writing, listening and speaking of the English Language.

A research done by Pillay (1995) shows students with lower competence of English tends to come from rural areas where exposure to English is limited. In a locality where English is not the dominant or preferred language, there is little wonder that there will be few or even no students will master English.

Despite being in an environment where English is rarely used, English Language is still the tool to gain higher knowledge, language of instructions on leaflets for most products, language for international communication and many more. Tickoo (1996) equates the investment in English to the achievement of development in the fields of technology, education and economy. This is obviously true as English is widely used in these fields, and most importantly English is the main language of the internet.

Recently, the Malaysian government is taking up the challenge to widen the use of English in education by planning to use English as a medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science subjects (Kenyataan, 2002, 5). Unsuccessful rural ESL students will be left behind if nothing is done to rectify this serious situation.

English Language is the second language in Malaysia. Due to the curriculum emphasis on Bahasa Melayu as the main medium of instruction for all subjects since 1983 (Mercer & Swann, 1996) (with exception to the subject of English Language), the standard of English have dropped significantly, especially in rural schools. In the environment of rural schools, which rarely stress on the importance of English Language be it written or spoken, most of the rural students will not feel that it is important to master English Language (Penguasaan, 2000, 4).

Therefore, it is important to find out the problems that the rural students face in English language learning and look into the strategies used by successful rural ESL students in overcoming the problems faced the unsuccessful ESL students.

According to Lessard and Clouston (1997) there are four general characteristics of LLS. Firstly, the strategies are devised by the second language students themselves. Secondly, it

enhances the learner's language learning and competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing in second or foreign language. Thirdly, LLS includes the observable behaviors, steps or techniques or the unobservable thoughts and mental processes. Lastly, LLS involves information and memory of vocabulary and grammatical rules.

In addition to those characteristics, Oxford (1990a) further adds LLS helps learners to be independent in language learning, extend the functions of language teachers, stems from language learning difficulties and are influenced by various factors.

Therefore, this study seeks to look into the LLS used by successful rural Form Four ESL students to master English in the four basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to find out:

- i. Common barriers faced by unsuccessful ESL students to master reading, writing, listening and speaking skills of English Language.
- ii. General difficulties that rural Form Four ESL students faced to master English language in terms of the four basic language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.
- iii. Language learning strategies employed by successful rural ESL students in overcoming the problem areas faced by the unsuccessful ESL students.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. What are the problem areas for the unsuccessful rural ESL students? (in each of the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking)
- ii. What are the common problem areas in the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking to rural ESL students in mastering English language?
- iii. What language learning strategies do the successful ESL students use that can overcome the common problem areas faced by both the successful and unsuccessful ESL students?

1.5 Significance of the Study

In finding out the strategies that successful rural ESL students employ to master English Language, methods can be devised to help rural ESL students at least master basic English for spoken and written interaction. Problem areas that are identified can also be looked into to help rural ESL to master English.

1.6 Definitions of Key Terms

These terms are used only for the purpose of this study :

Language Learning Strategies : methods employed to facilitate language learning to “develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in target language” (Tarone,1983). In this study, the target language is English. A more comprehensive description of language learning strategies will be dealt with in the literature review.

Successful ESL students : ESL students who are competent in the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) or can at least listen and speak English. Oxford (1990a) detailed competence in these four aspects:

1. Grammatical competence

This refers to which is the degree the language user mastered the linguistic code, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling and word formation.

2. Sociolinguistic competence

It is the extent the utterances can be used or understood in various social contexts and knowledge of speech acts (eg. persuading, apologizing and describing).

3. Discourse competence

The ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought above the level of single sentence counts one to be competent in this aspect.

4. Strategic competence

This competence refers to the ability to use strategies like using gestures in place of unknown words in order to overcome limitations in language knowledge.

Technically, those who obtained A,B, and C for their PMR English fall under this category. According to the PMR standardized grading system (Penilaian, 2002), 'D' grade shows minimal mastery of skills whereas grade 'C' indicates a fair mastery of skills. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, students obtaining grades 'A', 'B' and 'C' for their PMR English will be classified as 'successful' .

Unsuccessful ESL students: ESL students who face difficulties in communicating in English or cannot communicate at all in English. It means those who obtained D and below for their PMR English. In the PMR English paper two and paper three marking scheme provided by an English teacher, category D defines the student as failing to communicate ideas. Most of the students who were awarded with grade D and E were found to have severe language errors in terms of grammar and they produce incomprehensible written and spoken English during school based exams (H.S Chien, personal communications, January 6, 2003).

The marking scheme further adds that students who falls under category E “gives little or no relevant supporting reasons or opinions while speaking” (Penilaian, 2002).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses in deeper detail the Language Learner Strategies in reference to views by various academicians, particularly Oxford (1990a). The first section gives an overview of characteristics of LLS. The following subsection looks at the various components of LLS and pays special attention to Rebecca Oxford's explanation on LLS. The second section looks at related studies and findings on researches done on LLS. The third section relates the importance of LLS to Malaysia.

2.1 Definitions of learning strategies

Learning strategies are made up of two words, learning and strategies. Learning refers to the process where some certain knowledge is gained. The word strategy is derived from the Greek word, '*strategia*', which means the art of war (Oxford,1990a). In relation to language learning, it covers a wide range of means to learn a language.

There are many technical terms closely associated with LLS such as "learner strategies" and "learning strategies". Lessard-Clouston (1997) mentioned although

the terminologies and definitions may differ, there are four general characteristics of LLS :

- 1.the strategies come from the learners
- 2.it enhances the learner's language learning and competence in the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in second or foreign language.
- 3.it may be "seen" (behaviors, steps or techniques) or "unseen" (thoughts and mental process).
4. it involves information and memory (e.g. vocabulary knowledge, grammatical rules)

In addition to the above characteristics, Oxford (1990a) further adds LLS "allow learners to be self-directed, expand the roles of language teachers, are problem oriented, can be taught, are flexible and are influenced by various factors"(p.9).

Interestingly, Nunan (1997) limited the definition of LLS to that of solely mental processes which the learners use to learn and use the target language. Such narrow definition of LLS is in contrast to Oxford (1990b)'s recognition that mental process is only one of the components of LLS. Oxford (1990a) also put a disclaimer to the SILL . She recognises there are some possibilities that low averages scored in the SILL could be caused by strategies yet to be included in the SILL.

In the view of Wenden (1997), LLS covers the language behaviour that the learners engage in to facilitate their language learning. This view is again too narrow to adequately define LLS. In